

## Learning to Engage with Inequality in the Context of Resilience-Building Programming: Experiences from Isiolo, Kenya

This *IDS Practice Paper in Brief* shares learning about how to engage with inequality in research and development interventions focused on building resilience of local communities to climate change. There is wide recognition that analysing social, political, and economic inequality is central to understanding whose voices are being heard and whose realities are accounted for in interventions seeking to reduce vulnerability and build resilience. To achieve this, it is necessary to move beyond just the visible collective spaces where inclusion may happen – such as formal community governance structures and processes – and to acknowledge power dynamics and marginalisation within other less formal spaces. Grappling with inequality and underlying power dimensions as local interventions are being implemented can be challenging for practitioners. We share four lessons from our experience with a project which looked at inequality within climate change programming with *Borana* pastoralist communities in Isiolo, Kenya, through a collaboration between researchers and development practitioners.

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### Introduction

Vulnerability to climate change is the result of multiple intersecting factors. Many of these factors are social in nature; that is, resulting from the exacerbation of already existing precarity and vulnerabilities experienced by people within their specific social and political reality. Therefore, in order to understand the nature of climate change resilience and begin to identify ways to support the building of it for vulnerable populations, it is necessary to understand the social factors that lead to their vulnerability in the first place.

Understanding the social dimensions of vulnerability is particularly important in contexts where vulnerable populations rely on collectively managed resources, such as in the arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) of Kenya, where pastoralists rely on collectively owned and managed rangelands. A combination of both recurrent and prolonged droughts and a changing social and economic context for pastoralists (such as rangeland fragmentation, sedentarisation<sup>1</sup>, and commercialisation of livestock) have all but wiped away any productive assets of the poorest groups, driving them deeper into poverty. Today, the gap between the wealthier and poorest households is growing because of the combination of pressures these groups face.

This is why understanding the multiple ongoing social and other processes that result in some households and individuals being more vulnerable than others is a necessary starting point for building resilience. Yet many interventions still treat pastoralists as a homogeneous unit of analysis, often referred to as ‘the community’, a term which masks inequalities within collectives and makes it difficult to reach the most vulnerable.

Our action research project which focused on understanding who has access to climate information and how useful that information is, helped us gain a better understanding of the nature of power and inequalities within these communities. As a result of this experience, we share a practical approach that can help interventions in operationalising power analysis in relation to climate change resilience *in situ*.

## The learning context

The experience and learning shared in this *IDS Practice Paper in Brief* is the result of a research project implemented in Isiolo County, an arid pastoral area of northern Kenya, from November 2016 to August 2017. The research, led by an interdisciplinary team from the University of Sussex and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), was implemented in collaboration with the Adaptation (Ada) Consortium, a network that brings together the Kenya National Drought Management Authority (NDMA), Christian Aid, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), Kenya Meteorological Department (KMD), the United Kingdom's Met Office, and local partners working in five arid and semi-arid counties.

Since 2012, the Consortium has been working towards enabling county governments in five ASALs to support adaptation and climate resilient development, and to mainstream mechanisms that allow vulnerable people living on the rangeland to prioritise investments in public goods that build their resilience to climate change. Building on the work of the Ada Consortium, we carried out case study action research, taking a deeper dive into how inequality influences one particular resilience-building tool: climate information services (CIS).

The ASALs of Kenya, like much of sub-Saharan Africa, are home to a varied and dynamic environment. Rainfall changes day by day, from year to year, and over little more than kilometres. Climatic variability significantly impacts people's livelihoods; for example, the droughts over 2014–17 resulted in higher levels of food insecurity and malnutrition. In response to this, effort by government and non-government actors is going into developing climatic information using scientific weather data to produce daily and seasonal climate forecasts as well as projections decades ahead, to support adaptation and build resilience.

Yet the success of pastoralists' livelihoods relies not only on the temporal and spatial distribution of rain and temperature; it also relies on:

- access to pasture and water resources;
- the behaviour of and relations with other communities and clans;
- short- and long-term market conditions;
- health and educational needs; and
- cultural, political, and institutional contexts and pressures.

Further, these dimensions are not experienced in the same way by all people. Within any context, multiple inequalities, linked to gender, ethnicity, wealth, education, or sexuality, among others, lead to some people living in extreme poverty and marginalisation. There are, therefore, different levels of capacity within communities to have voice, access to resources, and the space to engage in decision-making that affects wellbeing.

The research aimed to shed light on the different situations of vulnerable groups and to understand the impacts of their access to, ability to learn from, and use of climate information with regards to making decisions about their livelihoods. This required us to look inside the collective so as to understand how multiple inequalities played out in context. With a focus on the processes and practices that facilitate knowledge sharing, joint learning, and co-creation – processes that are necessary for making decisions about long-term livelihoods strategies – we aimed to understand the way some people win and others lose and how this influenced their ability to build resilience as a household or individual.

## Identifying field sites

The research was a collaborative endeavour, and many of the partners had worked for years on the ground exploring ways to build resilience. This was an important part of the process, as any attempt to establish a deeper understanding of these communities required working with people who were already familiar with and close to the reality on the ground. The fieldwork was implemented in April and May 2017, and was led by the Resource Advocacy Program (RAP).

RAP has spent the last 15 years working across most rural communities in Isiolo, supporting the strengthening of resource management as a vehicle for achieving wellbeing among the *Borana* pastoralists. Given this history, it was both possible and appropriate to use participatory methods to work with community members in a form of co-inquiry, so that this work was not a standalone research endeavour, but could feed into ongoing learning and reflection on resilience building, as the work of RAP and others would continue into the future.

Two local field sites were selected along a continuum of high to low access to CIS but close in location:

1. Garbatulla, which had a greater investment in CIS through the presence of the KMD community radio station and an automatic weather station;
2. Kinna, where people are related to those from Garbatulla; they are in the same clan, but they belong to different grazing and pasture areas under different governance and management systems. The KMD radio station does not yet reach Kinna.

The implementation team comprised of:

- one UK-based researcher;
- one Nairobi-based research and development practitioner who is from Isiolo;
- a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) coordinator; and
- three local facilitators, all from Isiolo and who are members of the *Borana* tribe.

## Our approach

We share four key lessons from working together in this micro-level engagement.

### Lesson 1: Contextualise design and look for emergent entry points

It is often the case that researchers design rigorous research far from the field, away from the contextual realities which will ultimately define its implementation. The UK-based research team was responsible for the generic design of the case studies which were to be implemented in two counties in Kenya. An engagement process and set of participatory tools were identified as potentially useful to engage with villagers in the two sites.

Two levels of contextualisation took place before the team implemented the research.

First, Nairobi-based partners with extensive experience in Isiolo were able to provide guidance on the starting point for this engagement. For example, we knew that a resilience assessment (RA) had been implemented in 2013 in both Garbatulla and Kinna, providing initial data and understanding of poverty as it relates to the pastoralist livelihoods. We knew that the focus had been on activities that produce most of the food and income for the collective as a whole, so it might not have captured nuanced detail within the collective. During the RA, poverty was discussed using a participatory wealth ranking exercise based on the four Boran wealth group categories linked to livestock holdings: *qolle* (poor), *degg* (lower middle), *ufurabulla* (upper middle), and *dures* (rich). Given the intent of our research, this categorisation became an important entry point to our inquiry about inequality. Having started a discussion about poverty and social differentiation based on what is formally recognised as their collective system, we could then broaden and deepen this to appreciate how multiple intersecting inequalities are influencing people's experiences.

The second level of contextualisation was the result of a training and preparatory event with the fieldwork team as a whole, which took place in Isiolo town. The training focused first on understanding the concept of power and how it leads to inequalities, as foundational knowledge to the research endeavour. Prompting reflections upon what powerlessness means to us as individuals helped the team begin to turn a concept into reality, and to relate this to what they would be facilitating on the ground. As the researchers were embedded within the local context, they could translate the concept into real-life situations in which different forms of power – such as power over, power to, and power with<sup>2</sup> – are visible. A tool to describe social mobility was introduced as a way to understand how experiences of marginalisation, generated through different power relations, play out over time, and how it hinders or enables movement up or down a ladder of social wellbeing.

A second aspect of this training involved an adaptation of the Net-Map tool<sup>3</sup> – a tool that is used to visualise social interactions between different actors and to identify different levels of influence on decision-making. This view of social

relations would add an interactional understanding of how households of different wealth levels have access to information and resources to support their livelihoods. As part of the training, we mapped the network of one of the team members. This helped them both understand how to use the tool and have the experience of placing themselves on the social ladder, reflecting on their own power or powerlessness. We were also able to identify and develop the key that would be used in the network mapping exercise, based on this local knowledge.

Following this second level of contextualisation we were able to adapt the methodology further. We decided on a slightly different sequencing of the steps in the participatory methodology, based on greater understanding of how this might work in the village setting. We grappled with how easy or difficult it might be for participants to openly discuss the lives of the 'poor' or 'rich' in a group setting, and we devised strategies to help us mitigate potential discomfort in the group.

## **Lesson 2: Bring together research and practitioner perspectives through teamwork**

As a team of co-researchers, we had mixed experiences and skills. Some of us were rooted in the context in which we were working and had a real understanding of people's lives in the villages, whilst others had a greater experience of conceptualising and using an inequality lens to inform inquiry. This diversity of perspectives was useful in both enabling the emergent design and deepening our understanding in a relatively short period of fieldwork.

We used an action research framing to inform our collaboration and stay focused on the outcomes we sought, which were to influence resilience-building interventions and open up spaces to deepen understanding. We emphasised the process through which we would create an open and comfortable space to communicate as a team, and to navigate tensions that might arise. This approach to research is not simply about practising well together, it is rooted in theory and practice which recognises and values multiple ways of knowing and being, which is necessary when navigating complex issues relating to climate change adaptation. This was the social science contribution that was leading the design of the research process, helping to make it more transdisciplinary.

The local expertise of how to organise participatory research in that context was also instrumental in helping to assess when it was appropriate and necessary to point out the power dynamics that were influencing the discussion. For example, in Garbatulla, we made sure that one of the elders in the room, who was respected due to his age, yet at the same also represented the poorest households who often are not heard, had ample opportunity to share his views. This was an important facilitation decision that could safely bring to light power dynamics. And it shows the importance of local knowledge in these processes. Without it, we would not have understood these two intersecting realities of this man's life as both respected elder but also representative of an underprivileged and unheard group of people. Another example of bringing to light the experiences of marginalised people was how we structured group discussions with youth. We created a separate space where they were able to discuss the specific challenges they face, such as gambling and addiction, which many of the older generation are ashamed to discuss.

Yet it is also true that being close to the context, both in a geographic and social sense, means that one can also be blinded by it. Here the strength of mixing insider with insider–outsider and outsider perspectives within the field research team was helpful. In Garbatulla, this led to extensive triangulation through adapting while in the field. After the first participatory group sessions, the external team member was particularly concerned that we were still struggling to hear the views of those who are so excluded socially that they simply are unable to join a collective space. This led us to take a more random sampling strategy, spending time on the rangeland and approaching people in their homes as key informants – so that the research team went to them instead of bringing them into a formal process. While this meant the team entered into a more extractive mode of working and this was highly uncomfortable at times, it did enable new knowledge to be surfaced and serves to illustrate how mixing methods can strengthen a research process. Members of the local field team expressed emotionally how they had seen and heard a side of their own community that they had struggled to experience first-hand given their own relative power in context.

The central challenge to using an inequality and power lens with researchers is often the mindsets of researchers themselves: stepping away from one's own reality to see the blind spots and open up other conversations is a major challenge. Ensuring the team was working together was an important catalyst for shifting mindsets and opening up other ways of experiencing the research process. This is often called reflective practice in action research – where first a person reflects on their own experience as researcher and then this is combined with the group reflection on the experience. We practiced this through structuring reflection time into the daily post-activity discussions and planning for the next day, ensuring we were being responsive while also gaining trust and deepening our own collaboration.

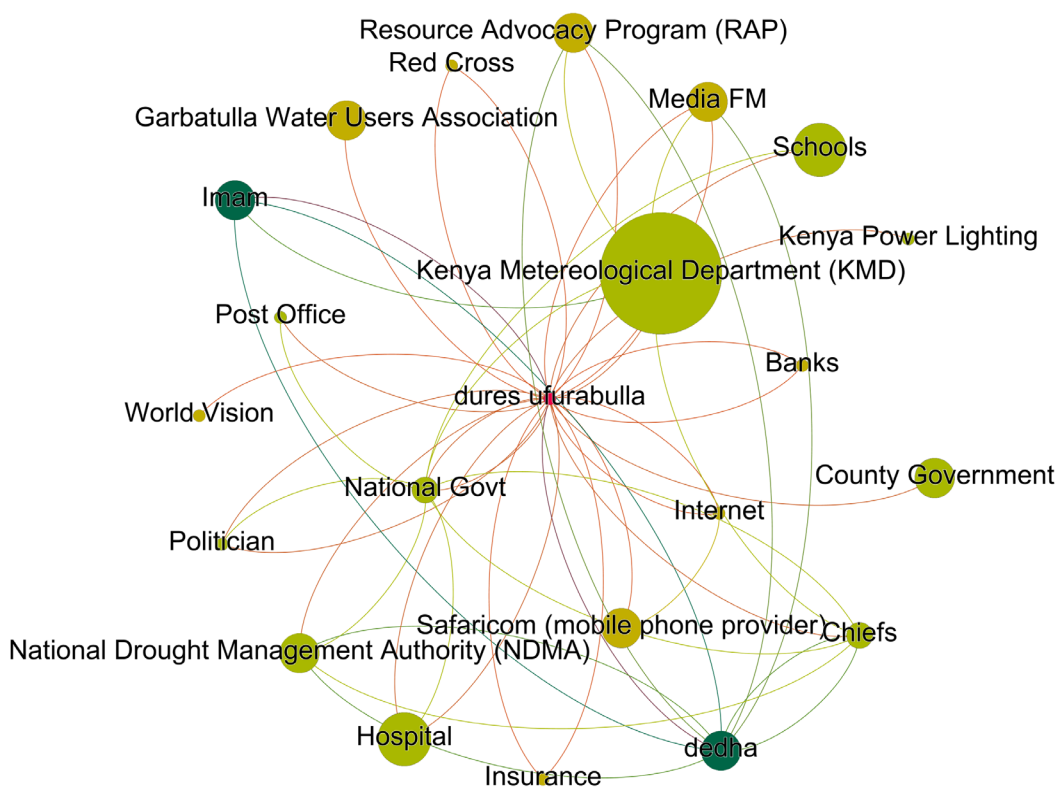
### Lesson 3: Blended network mapping tools can help visualise what often remains hidden

One of the central objectives of the case studies was to understand the social interactions through which power mediates access to and use of climate information and enables or disables participation in decision-making. There are many approaches to surfacing and capturing relational information in a participatory way. Participatory rural appraisal tools including stakeholder mapping and Venn diagrams, for example, have been used to visualise stakeholders and influence. Eva Schiffer's articulation of a participatory network mapping methodology (Net-Map) has become a foundational approach for participatory researchers. In this case, we had researchers with experience in formal quantitative network mapping help us design a network mapping tool and process which moved beyond past practice. The idea was to allow us to capture network data by balancing the formal nature of network analysis with the need to be accessible and intuitive for participants.

We did this by adapting the tool, which typically allows for four different types of actors and four different types of connections between them. We began by bringing together people from the community with diverse perspectives, in each village. We put them into two groups and asked them to map out the connections that a generic household would use in their livelihood strategies. One group focused on a generic poor household, while another focused on a generic wealthy household. In this way, the participants discussed and negotiated the telling of a narrative for the generic household that incorporated their multiple perspectives. The result was a detailed account of the relationship structures and the livelihood processes for different groups within the community. The discussion and narrative which took place during this process is as important as the visual network created, and facilitators captured the discussion as it unfolded.

The hand-drawn maps capture the sometimes contradictory and contested perspectives about what the community is like. They reveal differences and disparities between the two groups. In addition to the rich qualitative data that can be captured in these maps, the relational data can be digitised and analysed according to the social network analysis methodology.

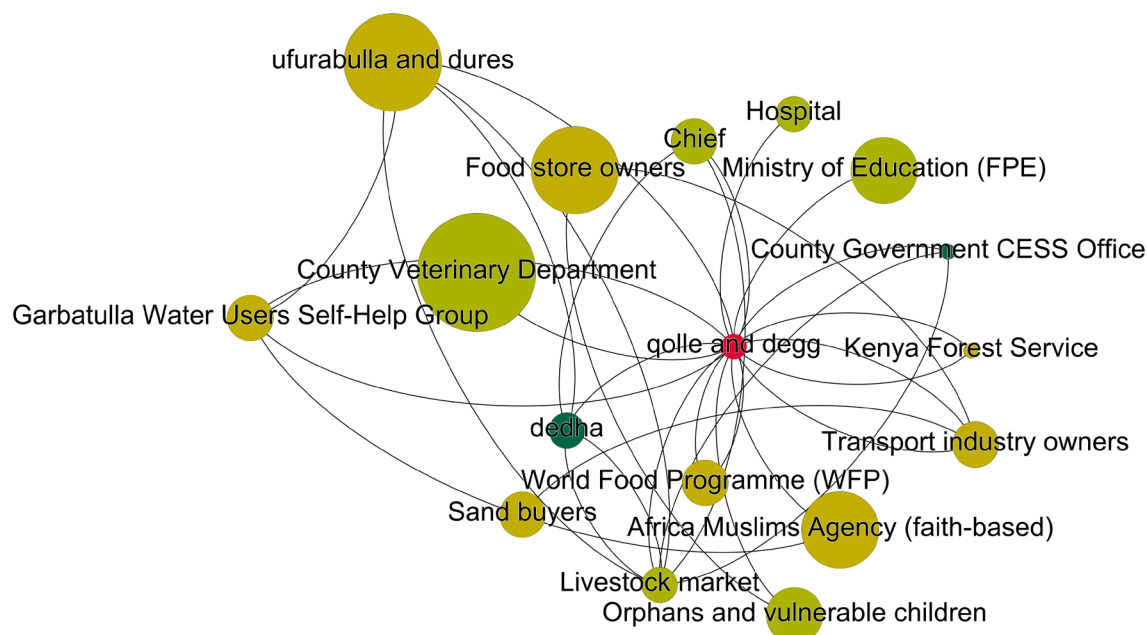
The two maps shown in Figures 1 and 2 were generated by digitising the relationship data reported by the respondents. Basic metrics could be calculated in order to standardise the comparisons within and between the communities (Crossley *et al.* 2015).



**Figure 1** Garbatulla dures/ufurabulla (wealthier households) ego map

Source: Authors' own.

Note: Actor key – light green = government; yellow = private and NGO; dark green = traditional institutions.

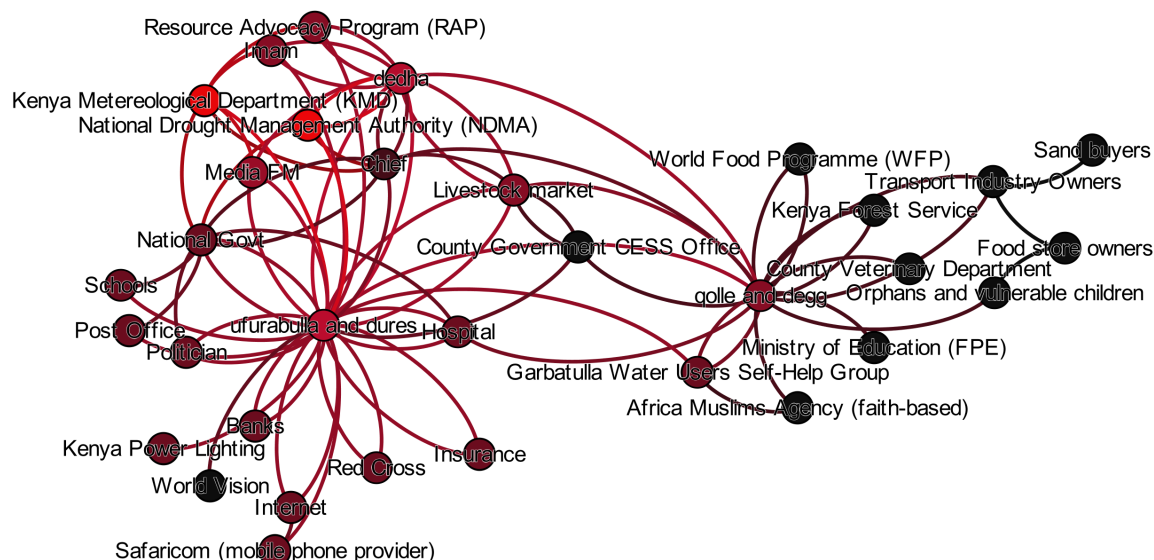


**Figure 2 Garbatulla qolle/degg (poorer households) ego map**

Source: Authors' own.

Note: Actor key – light green = government; yellow = private and NGO; dark green = traditional institutions.

These figures allowed the messy (though rich) hand-drawn maps to be presented back to the wider stakeholder group during the final project workshop in Nairobi, in a more digestible format. While the hand-drawn maps were most meaningful for the participants themselves in the villages, this project needed to convey these relational insights to the other project stakeholders, including the KMD and authorities responsible for disseminating climate information. In these figures, the size of the node corresponds to the influence reported by the respondents. One thing that jumps out in the two figures is that the poorer households report that wealthier households are a very influential relationship for their livelihoods – thus this illustrates the internal dependence mechanisms that are built on the basis of unequal access to resources.



**Figure 3 Propagation of climate information through the network**

Source: Authors' own.

Note: red depicts generation of climate information, and the relative colouring of other nodes illustrates the pathways through which the information can flow with the black nodes having least access).



In Figure 3, the networks for the two types of households are combined to demonstrate how the two groups relate to each other within the community. Building on the earlier point that the wealthier household is a key actor for the livelihoods of the poorer household, we see that the wealthier households are directly connected to the actors that deal with climate information while poorer households are at a significant distance from them. Such digitally enhanced visual tools thus can become boundary objects – facilitating tools – and in this example we see how they led to discussions around how the wealthier households can be seen as brokers of information and how the relationship they have with poorer households might be an opportunity rather than a barrier to building more inclusive approaches.

#### **Lesson 4: Sharing narratives of marginalisation is a powerful way to communicate inequalities**

In the previous lesson we discussed how visualisation was a powerful way to open up discussion around difficult and uncomfortable issues linked to inequality and power. Another tool to analyse power that we used and learned from, was to bring narratives of marginalisation into the discussion. Narrative approaches to research are useful for capturing and sharing holistic visions of people's life experiences – their perspectives and their embodied knowledge. Communicating about the experience of marginalised people is not easy. One of the key challenges we had was to find ways to present the findings of the research to the wider stakeholders as well as those responsible for programming, while at the same time ensuring that the process did not fall into a blaming exercise of how authorities are failing to reach the marginalised.

During the triangulation of findings in the case study sites, we used key informant interviews through semi-structured discussions to capture people's stories. For example, during the participatory work, the group identified a sub-category within the poorest group which they referred to as 'qolle fichan dhimtu'. This loosely translates as 'the poor with red urine'. The red urine describes the fact that the household consumes no milk. This group of extreme poor were also described as having the 'approval' to ask for help or beg from others, particularly since no one wants to lend their animals to them to herd because the risk of loss is too high. The following narrative of one particular woman the team spoke to became a key communication tool for the broader stakeholder conversation.

*An example of a qolle fichan dhimtu household is the household of Alma [pseudonym]. She is a single mother and has seven children – four boys and three girls. Her husband abandoned her after he became wealthy – he is now suffering from mental health problems. She manages through doing odd jobs such as collecting wood for construction. She explained that her parents are pastoralists and live on the rangeland and they send her milk when they can but that she usually goes without milk in the dry season and often without a meal. She is thus still linked to the pastoral livelihood of her extended family. She chooses to live in town because two of her children are in school and she wants them to get an education – this is a strategy to move out of poverty. She is not a member of any self-help groups but she has attempted to set up a chip selling business with her friend who is also a single mother, but they were unable to sustain it.*

This narrative provides a rich picture of someone's life, and the powerful metaphor of 'the poor with red urine' was a useful way to bring to decision-makers' attention what is often easily hidden from sight. It also builds an emotional engagement with the reality of inequality and poverty.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this *IDS Practice Paper in Brief* we have shared a micro-level experience from a short intervention that aimed to open up spaces for talking about power and inequality in resilience programming. The hope was that we would build, during our research and whilst out in the field, implementable tools that can bridge from nebulous concepts of power and inequality into the reality of inquiry and practice, where the same dynamics we aim to understand influence our ability to even get close to them. While this was a micro experience that is most meaningful to those of us involved directly in it, our four lessons hint at generalisable learning that can be translated across contexts.

Building the right team across research and practice, taking time to build trust and reflect together in order to contextualise and remain agile in implementation is something that many action researchers consider to be simply part of 'good research practice'. Yet we also know that this doesn't necessarily translate into reality. We hope that by sharing our experience in some detail, we can shed light on the importance of contextualised research, working with teams in a grounded way, and seeing the process of working together as important as the research outputs that we produce.

## Further reading

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sedentarisation refers to the shift from nomadic lifestyles to settled lifestyles and is a term used by anthropologists. See Witsenburg and Roba (2004) for analysis of the phenomenon in Kenya.

<sup>2</sup> We chose to work with these three expressions of power, based on VeneKlasen and Miller's (2002: 5) approach to power, as they are the simplest tool to help build confidence and competence in facilitators to appreciate the dynamic and complex nature of power. 'Power over' is the most widely appreciated form of power linked to repression and coercion; 'power to' is the capacity to achieve, emphasising the potential for a person to shape their life and is similar to the concept of agency; and 'power with' has to do with collective action and achievements that are brought about by a group acting together.

<sup>3</sup> Net-Map was developed by Eva Schiffer ([www.netmap.wordpress.com/about/](http://www.netmap.wordpress.com/about/)) and is a simple interview- or group-based tool that enables visualisation of influence network maps as an analytical and decision support tool. See also Schiffer (2007) and Schiffer and Hauck (2010).



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## Credits

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